

Obituary: Foundation member, Richmond (Rich/Richie) Newman Afford, 1922–2020

Ewen K. Cameron

Auckland Botanical Society (ABS) Veteran member, Richmond (Rich/Richie) Newman Afford (Figs. 1, 2, 3), 6 Dec 1922–13 Aug 2020, the Society's last surviving foundation member, passed away peacefully at his Mt Albert home (Fig. 4) aged 97. Lucy Cranwell, Curator of botany at the Auckland Museum, signed him up when he was a 14-year-old schoolboy in 1937.

He was taught the wonders of field botany at a young age – some 2/3 of his 44 herbarium collections in the Auckland Museum herbarium were collected in 1933 on the western slopes of Mount Ruapehu when he was only 9-10 years old. They are remarkably good specimens for a child's collection. These I presume were with his uncle John E. Attwood (1881-1945) (Fig. 5) who Rich credits in his 'Early Reminiscences' (Afford 1987) published for the Society's 50-year celebrations, as the person "...who fired us up with [botanical] enthusiasm in those early days" [the 'us' was Rich and his brother Tom]. Attwood was a self-taught amateur [botanist] who lived in Raetihi and worked as a "bush carpenter" (Moore 1986) near Ohakune. He spent most of his spare time in Tongariro National Park area, supplying the likes of the NZ Alpine and Rock Garden Society and the Native Plant Preservation Society with alpine seed and specimens for cultivation (Afford 1987). Rich's 1933 herbarium collections were made in January and December – school holidays no doubt with Uncle John. His most recent collection was in 1943 on Mt Moehau.

Attwood accompanied Lucy Cranwell, Lucy Moore, and Dan Hatch on their various forays into Tongariro

National Park area. Hatch (1988) mentions that while stationed at Waiouru during the War, in his spare time he mated up with Jack [John] Attwood who: "...was a veritable Encyclopaedia Botanica Ruapehu, and could give a name to almost every plant we stumbled on." Attwood was quite a serious collector with 1568 herbarium specimens in Auckland Museum (AK) and at least 130 specimens in Landcare Research (CHR). They are mostly from the central North Island (>600 specimens), but also large collections from Maungatautiri (370) and Stewart Island (>200). In 1932 Lucy Cranwell instigated the annual Cheeseman Memorial Native Flower Show, lasting for four days at a time. These grew into large affairs occupying a whole Exhibition Hall in the Auckland Museum and attracting thousands of visitors. Setting up the show and keeping the plants alive relied on a large workforce of volunteers. Attwood was a keen participant; he would arrive by overnight train from Ohakune with crates of alpine plants – enough to fill a whole bay and create an alpine habitat in the Hall (Afford 1987). Master Richie, Uncle John and other like-minded folk working together, masterfully coordinated by Lucy Cranwell, ultimately led to the formation of the ABS in 1937. The Attwood alpine section won prizes in 1934, 1935, 1936 and 1937 and Rich was awarded a first prize in 1935 (Fig. 6).

Rich went on to say: "...we were dedicated youngsters joining in field trips and entering into correspondence with Lucy Cranwell on numerous botanical questions...Saturday mornings were devoted to helping Lucy with the Museum herbarium and with any luck Lucy would give me a ride home



Fig. 1. Rich Afford cutting the ABS 75th Jubilee dinner cake, assisted by Helen Cogle and Shirley Bollard, at the Unitec, Long Black Cafe. Photo: Joshua Salter, 27 Oct 2012 (see Wilcox 2013).



Fig. 2. Rich chatting to Ewen at the ABS 75th Jubilee pre-dinner drinks at the Unitec, Long Black Cafe. Photo: Joshua Salter, 27 Oct 2012.



Fig. 3. Man about town just after the war. Rich Afford originally trained for WWII in the artillery; later changing to the Air Force, ending the war in the Pacific as a pilot. Photo: from the Afford family archive.



Fig. 4. Rich's home for 67 years at 18 Mt Albert Road with its lovely garden of native trees, tree ferns, shrubs and colourful flowers; built in 1865 or earlier. Photo: EKC, 25 Oct 2020.

afterwards...During this period the Afford family, with the aid of plants collected by my uncle transformed a blackberry gully into a patch of native bush." This planted native bush patch still stands at 24 Tiverton Road, Avondale (Haydon Afford, pers. comm.) and includes two kauri (*Agathis australis*) that Rich planted in his teens (Afford 2003a). "We were a family of conservationists before the term itself came into common usage" (Afford 2003a).

Rich completed his 'Reminiscences' (Afford 1987) with: "...I may never have fulfilled the botanical aspirations my uncle and Lucy held for me in those days, due to the war and other considerations, but I think that people such as my uncle and many other enthusiastic amateurs will always be remembered as **that small but solid rock upon which the Auckland Botanical Society was founded.**" [my emphasis].

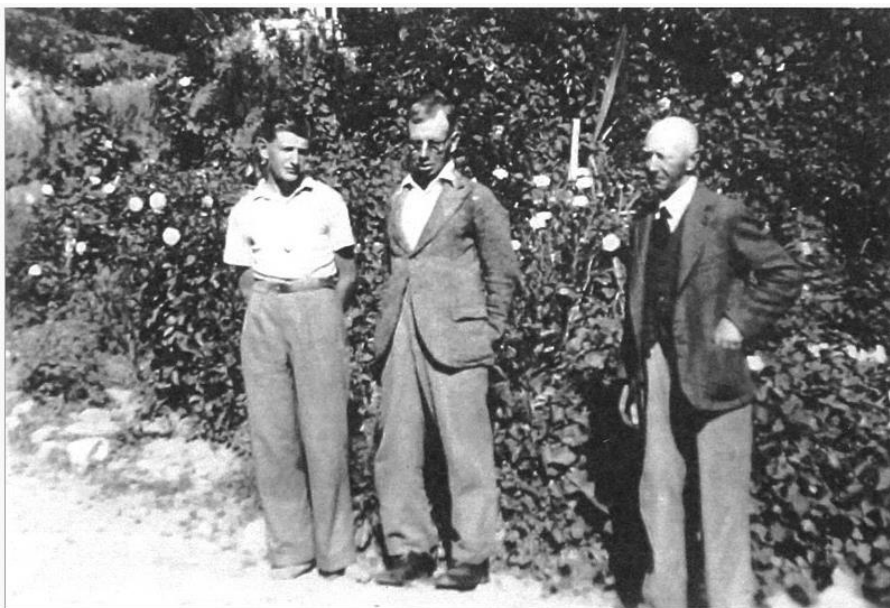


Fig. 5. Rich Afford (aged 17), John Attwood (uncle John) and Fred Traill (on right), collecting plants on Stewart Island - Lucy Cranwell was also present. Photo: by Rich Afford from Thwaites (2015: p. 254), Jan 1940.

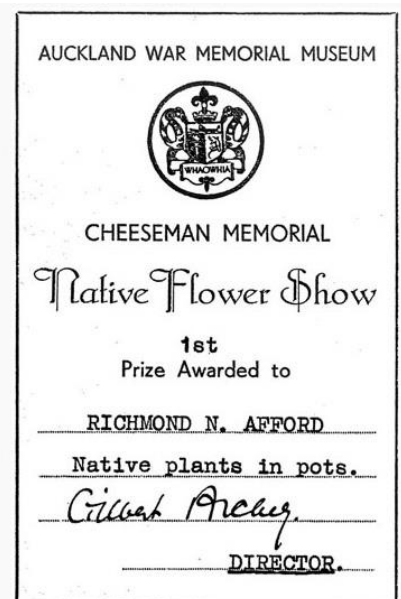


Fig. 6. A first prize awarded to Rich Afford in 1935, Cheeseman Memorial Native Flower Show. From: Thwaites (2015: p. 254).

Rich was born in Helensville, grew up in Avondale, attended Mt Albert Grammar School, served part of WWII in the Pacific, and married Leola (née Tasker) in 1948. They purchased a derelict house in Mt Albert in 1953, which became their family home (Fig. 4). The house was built in 1865 or earlier, qualifying as one of the oldest private houses in Auckland (Afford 2003b). They purchased cabins to rent at Piha which they sold later and then purchased a Piha bach further up the hill. After the War, Rich first worked for a couple of years for the Department of Lands & Survey, then for the Commercial Union Company until he retired, aged 59. He was amused that he spent more years on the pension than working!

Rich and Leola were quite regular attendees of ABS trips until Leola passed away in August 2005. Since then Rich has only occasionally attended our evening meetings when he would share with us a sprig of an unusual flowering native plant from his beautiful garden, like mairehau (*Leionema nudum*). He attended our field trip to Rotoroa Island (perhaps his last trip?) in November 2006 (Fig. 7).

In the 1980s, I remember Rich and Leola telling me of their tropical secret holiday location: Niue Island. They were sure that Cheryl and I would love it too – and they were right, but it took us nearly three decades to discover that.

All his life Rich loved to plant trees (Fig. 8). He started young, growing native plants in 1935 (Fig. 6). Later, he was part of a Mount Albert Grammar School group in 1938 to observe Arbor Day at Gribblehirst Park, along with Mount Albert Borough Council and other pupils from within the borough,



Fig. 7. Rich Afford during our ABS field trip to Rotoroa Island talking to our Salvation Army host. Photo: EKC, 4 Nov 2006 (see Cameron 2007).

who planted c. 100 native and exotic trees (Anon. 2007, Afford 2018). In 2018 he was photographed (Fig. 9) beside a large she-oak (*Casuarina* sp.) that he had planted there. Along with his family he actively planted native trees at his parents' Tiverton Road, Avondale, property (Afford 2003a), and later at his Mt Albert property (Fig. 4). Many of them are now tall, but the rewarewa (*Knightia excelsa*) by the bowling club died in a drought several years ago, and a 10 m-tall kauri ricker, which he planted with son Haydon, succumbed to the recent drought. Rich and Leola were active in the volunteer planting of Tiritiri Matangi Island and (until Covid lockdown) Rich attended all the gatherings of the Owairaka / Mt Albert Tree Protection Group, which formed in Nov 2019 to protect the healthy exotic trees on the maunga from being needlessly felled. His plantings there include



Fig. 8. Rich in 2000 with his wife Leola, planting at the Roy Clements Treeway, Mt Albert. Photo: from the Afford family archive.



Fig. 9. Rich in 2018 next to a she-oak that he planted at Gribblehirst Park. Photo: from the Afford family archive.

a now 15 m-tall kahikatea (*Dacrydium dacrydioides*). Auckland's regional botanist during the 1970s-1980s, Alan E. Esler (1929-2016), was a good friend and near-neighbour of Rich. They both created and enjoyed similar colourful Mount Albert gardens and both loved plants. At 95 years old Rich published an article "In praise of trees" (Afford 2018) expressing his love of trees and referring to them as "our arboreal friends".

Rich was an active member of many societies, including: Auckland Botanical Society (foundation member 1937); Auckland Natural History Club; Mount Albert Historical Society (foundation member 2006); Avondale-Waterview Historical Society (foundation and "life" member 2002) [between 2003-2018 he published 17 articles in their journal mainly about growing up in Avondale-Mt Albert]; Point Chevalier Historical Society; Auckland Garden Club (member for 16 years); University of the Third Age, Mt Albert Branch; and Ōwairaka / Mt Albert Tree Protection Group.

Rich was always the gentleman and when the ABS committee elected him as a veteran member (no more annual subs) he responded with a very generous donation to the Lucy Cranwell Student Grant Fund for botanical research. At his memorial service we heard of his other generous monetary gifts to many other societies.

He died during a Covid-19 Auckland lockdown and his family later organised a memorial service for him, at the Mount Albert Bowling Club (Rich's neighbour on the north side) on 23 October 2020, which was well attended. Most appropriately we were asked "in lieu of flowers please plant a tree".

One stalwart ABS member, Maureen Young, said to me about the memorial service: "I loved old Rich and I am very sorry that I won't be able to attend" – high praise indeed. Richie was always the warm-natured gentleman. Thank you for your long-lifetime support to the Society and for being a bit of the founding rock of the Society; we loved you and we'll truly miss you.

Rich is survived by one child, three grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Acknowledgements

I thank: Haydon Afford (Rich's son) for information and the use of family images; Jessica Beever for Ross Beever's archive on Rich; Mike Wilcox for the 2007 article on Rich Afford planting at Gribblehirst Park as a schoolboy; Lisa Truttman for information on Rich's historical societies memberships and the link to The Avondale Historical Society publications; Kate Boardman for Attwood herbarium specimen data held at Landcare Research; and Joshua Salter for use and improvement of images.

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